With Edged Tools

By HENRY SETON MERRIMAN

Author of "The Sowers," "Roden's Corner," "From One Generation to Another," Etc.

"Thomson," he continued to the butler, with that pride of keeping up before all the world which was his, "bring up coffee."

The butler closed the door behind him. Sir John was holding on to the back of his high chair in rather a constrained way—almost as if he were suffering pain. They looked at each other again, and there was a resemblance in the very manner of raising the eyelid. There was a stronger resemblance in the grim, waiting silence which neither of them would break.

At last Jack spoke, approaching the fire and looking into it.

"You must excuse my taking you by surprise at this—unusual hour." He turned, saw the lamp, the book and the eyeglasses, more especially the eyeglasses, which seemed to break the train of his thoughts. "I only landed at Liverpool this afternoon," he went on, with hopeless politeness. "I did not trouble you with a telegram, knowing that you object to them."

The old man bowed gravely.

"I am always glad to see you," he said suavely. "Will you not sit down?"

And they had begun wrong.

"I suppose you have dined," said Sir John when they were seated, "or may I offer you something?"

"Thanks, I dined on the way up, in a twilit refreshment room, with one waiter and a number of attendant black beetles."

Things were going worse and worse.

Sir John smiled, and he was still smiling when the man brought in coffee.

"Yes," he said conversationally, "for speed combined with discomfort I suppose we can hold up heads against any country. Seeing that you are dressed, I supposed that you had dined in town."

"No. I drove straight to my rooms and kept the cab while I dressed."

What an important matter this dressing seemed to be! And there were fifteen months behind it—fifteen months which had aged one of them and sobered the other.

Jack was sitting forward in his chair with his immaculate dress shoes on the fender, his knees apart, his elbows resting on them, his eyes still fixed on the fire. Sir John looked keenly at him beneath his frowning, lashless lids. He saw the few gray hairs over Jack's ears, the suggested wrinkles, the drawn lines about his mouth.

"You have been ill?" he said.

Joseph's letter was locked away in the top drawer of his writing table.

"Yes, I had rather a bad time, a serious illness. My man nursed me through it, however, with marked success, and the Gordons, with whom I was staying, were very kind."

"I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Gordon."

Jack's face was steady, suavely impenetrable.

Sir John moved a little and set his empty cup upon the table.

"A charming girl," he added.

"Yes."

"You are fortunate in that man of yours," Sir John said; "a first class man."

"Yes. He saved my life."

Sir John blinked, and for the first time his fingers went to his mouth, as if his lips had suddenly got beyond his control.

"If I may suggest it," he said rather indistinctly, "I think it would be well if we signified our appreciation of his devotion in some substantial way. We might well do something between us."

He paused and threw back his shoulders.

"I should like to give him some substantial token of my gratitude."

Sir John was nothing if not just.

"Thank you," answered Jack quietly. He turned his head a little and glanced not at his father, but in his direction. "He will appreciate it, I know."

"I should like to see him tomorrow."

Jack winced, as if he had made a mistake.

"He is not in England," he explained. "I left him behind me in Africa. He has gone back to the simiacine plateau."

The old man's face dropped rather piteously.

"I am sorry," he said, with one of the sudden relapses into old age that Lady Cantourne dreaded. "I may not have a chance of seeing him to thank him personally. A good servant is so rare nowadays. These modern democrats seem to think that it is a nobler thing to be a bad servant than a good one. As if we were not all servants!"

He was thirsting for details. There were a thousand questions in his heart, but not one on his lips.

"Will you have the kindness to remember my desire," he went on suavely, "when you are settling up with your man?"

"Thank you," replied Jack. "I am much obliged to you."

"And in the meantime, as you are without a servant, you may as well make use of mine. One of my men—Henry—who is too stupid to get into mischief—a great recommendation, by the way—understands his business. I will ring and have him sent over to your rooms at once."

He did so, and they sat in silence until the butler had come and gone.

"We have been very successful with the simiacine, our scheme," said Jack suddenly. I have brought home a consignment valued at £70,000."

Sir John's face never changed.

"And," he asked, with veiled sarcasm, "do you carry out the—er—commercial part of the scheme?"

"I shall begin to arrange for the sale of the consignment tomorrow. I shall have no difficulty, at least I anticipate none. Yes, I do the commercial part as well as the other. I held the plateau against 2,000 natives for three months with fifty-five men. But I do the commercial part as well."

As he was looking into the fire still, Sir John stole a long comprehensive glance at his son's face. His old eyes lighted up with pride and something else, possibly love. The clock on the mantelpiece struck 11. Jack looked at it thoughtfully, then he rose.

"I must not keep you any longer," he said somewhat stiffly.

Sir John rose also.

"I dare say you are tired; you need rest. In some ways you look stronger, in others you look fagged and pulled down."

"It is the result of my illness," said Jack. "I am really quite strong."

He paused, standing on the hearth rug, then suddenly he held out his hand.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night."

Sir John allowed him to go to the door, to touch the handle, before he spoke.

"Then"— he said, and Jack paused. "Then we are no further on?"

"In what way?"

"In respect to the matter over which we unfortunately disagreed before you went away?"

Jack turned with his hand on the door.

"I have not changed my mind in any respect," he said gently. "Perhaps you are inclined to take my altered circumstances into consideration, to modify your views."

"I am getting rather old for modification," answered Sir John suavely.

"And you see no reason for altering your decision?"

"None."

"Then I am afraid we are no further on," he paused. "Good night," he added gently as he opened the door.

"Good night."

* * * * * * *

Lady Cantourne was meant for happiness and a joyous motherhood. She had had neither; but she went on being "meant" until the end—that is to say she was still cheery and capable. She had thrown an open letter on the little table at her side—a letter from Jack Meredith announcing his return to England and his natural desire to call and pay his respects in the course of the afternoon.

"So," she had said before she laid the letter aside, "he is home again—and he means to carry it through?"

While she still sat there the bell rang. When Jack Meredith came into the room she rose to greet him with a smile of welcome.

"Before I shake hands," she said, "tell me if you have been to see your father."

"I went last night—almost straight from the station. The first person I spoke to in London, except a cabman."

So she shook hands.

"You know," she said, without looking at him—indeed, carefully avoiding doing so—"life is too short to quarrel with one's father. At least it may prove too short to make it up again—that is the danger."

"The quarrel was not mine," he said. "I admit that I ought to have known him better. I ought to have spoken to him before asking Millicent. It was a mistake."

Lady Cantourne looked up suddenly.

"What was a mistake?"

"Not asking his—opinion first."

She turned to the table where his letter lay and fingered the paper pensively.

"I thought, perhaps, that you had found that the other was a mistake—the engagement."

"No," he answered.

"Millicent will be in presently," she said; "she is out riding."

They talked of his life in Africa, of his success with the simiacine, of which discovery the newspapers were not yet weary, until the bell was heard in the basement, and thereafter Millicent's voice in the hall.

Lady Cantourne rose deliberately and went downstairs to tell her niece that he was in the drawing room, leaving him there waiting alone.

Presently the door opened and Millicent hurried in. She threw her gloves and whip—anywhere—on the floor and ran to him.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried.

It was very prettily done. In its way it was a poem.

"And, Jack, do you know," she went on, "all the newspapers have been full of you. You are quite a celebrity. And are you really as rich as they say?"

"I think I can safely say that I am not," he answered.

Lady Cantourne left them there for nearly an hour, in which space of time she probably reflected they could build up as rosy a future as was good for them to contemplate. Then she returned to the drawing room, followed by a full sized footman bearing tea.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried.

She was too discreet a woman, too deeply versed in the sudden changes of the human mind and heart, to say anything until one of them should give her a distinct lead. They were not shy and awkward children. Perhaps she reflected that the generation to which they belonged is not one heavily handicapped by too subtle a delicacy of feeling.

Jack Meredith gave her the lead before long.

"Millicent," he said without a vestige of embarrassment, "has consented to be openly engaged now."

Lady Cantourne nodded comprehensively.

"I think she is very wise," she said.

"I know she is very wise," she added, turning and laying her hand on Jack's arm. The two phrases had quite a different meaning. "She will have a good husband."

"So you can tell everybody now," chimed in Millicent in her silvery way.

Lady Cantourne was not very communicative during that refined little tea a trois, but she listened smilingly to Jack's optimistic views and Millicent's somewhat valueless comments.

"I am certain," said Millicent, at length boldly attacking the question that was in all their minds, "that Sir John will be all right now. Of course, it is only natural that he should not like Jack to—to get engaged yet. Especially before, when it would have made a difference to him in money, I mean. But now that Jack is independent—you know, auntie, that Jack is richer than Sir John."

Lady Cantourne was rather thoughtful at that moment. She could not help coming back and back to Sir John.

"Of course," she said to Jack, "we must let your father know at once. The news must not reach him from an outside source."

"I will write and tell him," said Jack quietly.

Even funerals and lovers must bow to mealtimes, and Jack Meredith was not the man to outstay his welcome. He saw Lady Cantourne glance at the clock. Clever as she was, she could not do it without being seen by him.

So he took his leave, and Millicent went to the head of the stairs with him.

CHAPTER XXI.

Of late Sir John had felt a singular desire to sit down whenever opportunity should offer, but he had always been found standing on the hearth rug by the butler, and, hard old aristocrat that he was, he would not yield to the somewhat angular blandishments of the stiff backed chair.

He stood for a few moments with his back to the smoldering fire, and, being quite alone, he perhaps forgot to stiffen his neck, for his head drooped, his lips were unsteady; he was a very old man.

A few minutes later, when he strode into the dining room, where butler and footman awaited him, he was erect, imperturbable, impenetrable.

At dinner it was evident that his keen brain was hard at work. He forgot one or two of the formalities which were religiously observed at that solitary table. He hastened over his wine, and then he went to the library. There he wrote a telegram, slowly, in his firm, ornamental handwriting.

It was addressed to Gordon, Loango, and the gist of it was—"Wire whereabouts of Oscard—when he may be expected home."

At half past 8 Jack arrived. Sir John was awaiting him in the library, grimly sitting in his high backed chair, as carefully dressed as for a great reception.

He rose when his son entered the room and they shook hands. There was a certain air of concentration about both, as if they each intended to say more than they had ever said before. The coffee was duly brought. This was a revival of an old custom. In bygone days Jack had frequently come in thus and they had taken coffee before going together in Sir John's carriage to one of the great social functions at which their presence was almost a necessity. Jack had always poured out the coffee—tonight he did not offer to do so.

"I came," he said suddenly, "to give you a piece of news which I am afraid will not be very welcome. Millicent and I have decided to make our engagement known."

"You know," said Sir John gravely, "that I am not much given to altering my opinions. I do not say that they are of any value; but, such as they are, I usually hold to them. When you did me the honor of mentioning this matter to me last year, I gave you my opinion."

"And it has in no way altered?"

"In no way. I have found no reason to alter it."

"Will you, at all events, give me your reasons?" he asked. "I am not a child."

"I think," he said, "that it would be advisable not to ask them."

"I should like to know why you object to my marrying Millicent," persisted Jack.

"Simply because I know a bad woman when I see her," retorted Sir John deliberately.

"I am sorry you have said that," said the son.

"Just," continued the father, "as I know a good one."

He paused, and they were both thinking of the same woman, Jocelyn Gordon.

Sir John had his say about Millicent Chyne, and his son knew that that was the last word. She was a bad woman. From that point he would never move.

There was a long silence, while the two men sat side by side gazing into the fire.

"I am getting too old to indulge in the luxury of pride," said the father at length. "I will attend your marriage. I will smile and say pretty things to the bridesmaids. Before the world I will consent under the condition that the ceremony does not take place before two months from this date."

"I agree to that," put in Jack.

Sir John rose and stood on the hearth rug, looking down from his great height upon his son.

"But," he continued, "between us let it be understood that I move in no degree from my original position. I object to Millicent Chyne as your wife. But I bow to the force of circumstances. I admit that you have a perfect right to marry whom you choose—in two months' time."

So Jack took his leave.

"In two months' time," repeated Sir John, when he was alone, with one of his twisted, cynical smiles—"in two months' time—qui vivra verra."

* * * * * * *

There are some places in the world where a curse seems to brood in the atmosphere. Msala was one of these. Perhaps these places are accursed by the deeds that have been done there. Who can tell?

Could the trees—the two gigantic elms that stood by the river's edge—could these have spoken, they might perhaps have told the tale of this little inland station in that country where, as the founder of the hamlet was in the habit of saying, no one knows what is going on.

All went well with the retreating column until they were almost in sight of Msala, when the flotilla was attacked by no less than three hippopotamuses. One canoe was sunk and four others were so badly damaged that they could not be kept afloat with their proper complement of men. There was nothing for it but to establish a camp at Msala and wait there until the builders had repaired the damaged canoes.

The walls of Durnovo's house were still standing, and here Guy Oscard established himself with as much comfort as circumstances allowed. He caused a temporary roof of palm leaves to be laid on the charred beams, and within the principal room, the very room where the three organizers of the great simiacine scheme had first laid their plans, he set up his simple camp furniture.

Oscard was too great a traveler, too experienced a wanderer, to be put out of temper by this enforced rest. The men had worked very well hitherto. It had, in its way, been a great feat of generalship, this leading through a wild country of men unprepared for travel, scantily provisioned, disorganized by recent events. No accident had happened, no serious delay had been incurred, although the rate of progress had necessarily been very slow. Nearly six weeks had elapsed since Oscard with his little following had turned their backs forever on the simiacine plateau. But now the period of acute danger had passed away. They had almost reached civilization. Oscard was content.

To be Continued